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By

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RELIGION AND TIME.

III.

In two preceding sermons I have spoken of some relations of Religion to the past and, again, to the future. What now shall I say of the relation of Religion to the present?

The past and future can exercise tyranny over the spirit in Religion only together. Neither alone can reign. But crown one and instantly comes the other to be crowned as a colleague on the throne.

The past and the future are the same as memory and hope. Whoever gives himself to memory till it be a tyrant over him, and he live in it, neglecting the things at hand, will welcome hope to rule over him on the other side. There can be no other relief for him. From the tyranny of the past in memory he will find no escape, no comfort, except that hope which is an equal and subtle tyranny of the future. For if one give himself to the past, and refer his mind, his thoughts, his reverence, his religion, faith and revelation of God to the past, he will be void of comfort, joy, astonishment and power in the present, because he has bound himself to the past and the past is gone, and is not here to give him glories and perceptions and knowledge. It is fixed and done. No more can it effect him as the waving and tidal life of the present will, if he only cast himself on the breast of it. The present, however, looks but mean and unprofitable and deserted of the spirit to one who fixes his faith and wonder on a past history. Therefore, what comfort can he find but in looking over this present onward into a future, which then rules over him by golden hopes that the likeness of the past will return some time? Both memory and hope are most blessed powers in us; but naught is blessed when it has grown a Cæsar

over all else in us. Memories have a great part in happiness, and hopes nourish courage and courage again feeds hope very blissfully. But if once memory and hope claim all power, and rule us, and we lose ourselves in the indolence of their palmy and gorgeous tyranny, the dignity of the present is obscured, and in that cloudiness fades the most noble and thrilling part of all living and rejoicing.

I may illustrate by a picture of two kings and a peasant. The two kings are sitting in purple robes, idling and toying with their ornaments and jewels. Before them stands a peasant, a poor man, meanly clad, very sturdy, with a mattock in his hand wherewith he toils on this earth. The two kings are looking at the rough and ready laborer with lofty and superior smiles, or mayhap with contempt. The kings are the past and the future: the peasant is the present. If the kings can be stripped of their purple pomp and come down from the thrones, the three will be found very brotherly and well able to work together.

Now, that Religion must begin with awe of the past, or at least soon come thereto, and for a time find best its own countenance in that awe, I have said;* and that therewith there must grow up golden hopes in the future, a heaven of shining promises in the sky, also I have said.† These steps in Religion seem inevitable; at least, if we may conclude from the histories of all religions. But they are primary steps. After the primitive forms and conditions have served their end, it is well that they should pass away quietly; or, more exactly, it is well that the human mind should go on its way in courageous fashion, dropping any props or aids or manner of progress which once belonged to it but now are outgrown. For the essence of growth is the disuse of things that are spent; and a condition of growth is the power to perceive when the virtue of anything is spent, thereupon to disuse it and put away the weight and encumbrance of it.

Behold this plainly in the growth of the body. How were the body to grow without the instinct to perceive when the virtue of food is spent, thereupon to disuse the remains of it and cast them forth?

For other illustration, what if a man should go in frocks and knee-stockings all his life because so he dressed as a child,

* Sermon of Religion and Time, I. † Sermon of Religion and Time, II.

and found it then comely and suitable, and warm enough because he could go quickly into the house if he were cold?

The secret of advance and growth, as I have said, is to disuse what is spent, *after well spending it and extracting the virtue of it*. Wherefore nothing must be thrown away too quickly. This indeed seldom happens, and only with the rash and unaffectionate. But contrariwise, naught must be too stoutly and too long held too, cried up because once it has had a great or august virtue, albeit now all the virtue is spent and the husks of it are only empty baggage. It were well always to cleave stiffly to what once is obtained, says Bacon, "if time stood still; which contrariwise moveth so round, that a foward retention of custom is as turbulent a thing as an innovation; and they that reverence too much old times are but a scorn to the new." Now, therefore, as growth is, first, to extract all the virtue of food and secondly to disuse it when so it is spent, it follows that we must be free in mind, neither chained to the past nor led captive by a new order, but large and wise, balancing well, and discerning what is spent, or so nigh spent that new things must be made ready, "and as the scripture saith, that we make a stand upon the ancient way, and then look about us, and discern what is the straight and right way, and so walk in it." But instead of this wisdom, we behold on all sides those who throw away wildly and wastefully the "ancient way" and dump it forth with unsober mind at the first tinkle of some new thing which catches their fickleness; but far more we see the numbers of those who hold fast to "the ancient way" and will not listen to parting with it, though time has "moved round" far past it, and all the virtue of it has been extracted long since.

So it is with religion which rests itself on the past, and builds its authority on historical events and persons, and thereupon also spies forward into the coming time, conceiving of a new golden age and of happy rewards in a future heaven. This is the very ancient way, the primitive steps of religion, and time has "moved round" far beyond them. What then happens if this ancient and venerable manner of religion be continued after the virtue of it is spent, when the proper era of it has gone by and time has moved beyond it?

Consider. This manner of religion dwells on a past glory as

the source of faith and on a future glory as the reward of faith. What can result therefrom after long process? When the mind so has gathered knowledge that it should be beyond and above these thoughts—what can result but that *the present shall be made barren to our minds and hearts?* And surely this is a very sad result; if the past and the future have nought to do for men but to make the present barren and dead, while we feed on memories and expectations, it is sad indeed. If religion be so needfully a child of the past as to its sanctions, and of the future as to its rewards, that the present lies between blank, unhallowed, unvisited of heaven, it is very sorrowful. Yet this is the result.

Attend first to miracles to see one way in which this result comes about. Religion is made to build itself on marvels and signs in a past epoch. Now, at first this does no harm, because similar miracles are supposed to be in the present also. The primitive mode of thought continues long and science grows but slowly, The same wonder-working visits of God which established the religion in the beginning are conceived as still occurring. Wherefore the present will seem as divine as the past. But at last such things are known not to be in the present, and no longer to be looked for. Science lifts up the idea of order and law, and thenceforth the miracles flee like rosy morning twilight before the full light of day in which men go forth to their labors. This knowledge being attained, if religion still found on miraculous deeds and signs, as vouchersafements from heaven in the past, divinity will seem perforce less imminent and present now than then in the old days when God walked with men and worked his wonders. And so *does* it seem indeed. Such is very sadly the effect of the adoration of the past in religion. Awe and joy in the present vanish. Far in the East are all the colors of the heavenly communications, miraculous incident, angelic exaltations. But here there is no EMMANUAL; he comes not, we are in a barren land; we must look far westward to a time when he shall come again and once more reveal glory.

The Northern myths of Europe contain a good, and even a moving example of this effect in religion. Among the Norsemen there was a tradition of a golden age of peace, prosperity, exaltation, when men were kind and the *Æsir*, their gods, full

of favors unto them. Consequently, the people looked on the present as only a bitter conflict soon to overwhelm gods and men in ruin. After this overthrow a new earth was to rise from the ocean, with new men to triumph in the immortal presence of Balder, the Beautiful. More reasonable, and perhaps on a higher plane in this matter, than the Christians, the Norsemen by no means dreamed of a ruin of earth alone. What the Æsir ruled, could not be desolated save with their ruin also. The gods too must be swallowed up in the darkness, if they could not prevent the darkness. In the new order a mighty Spirit, higher than the Æsir, was "to reveal himself to rule over the world through all eternity."

The history of Jesus is a like example. As long as the Apostles had the Master with them, they seem to have said little about the future, because they felt the present charged with the divine. But when Jesus became a memory and the heavenly witness seemed removed, then arose at once the dreams of the second advent, which have continued to excite men to the present day. And as a political element, at first very strong, dropped from Christianity, all the more it looked both backward and far forward. The past was filled with the light of the life of Jesus, wonderful and great; the future with corresponding expectations, to be imaged only in crystal arches and golden streets. Between, stood the present, unhallowed, deserted, blank, bleak and alienated,—and still so it stands "a vale of tears," a desert land, a devil's field, say the churches—a waste of woe of which only the edges far on either side cling with fingers of sand to a living green.

Consider, again, another way in which results a barrenness of the present from that manner of religion which builds on the past and thence projects into the future. By such religion, this world and our life is overflowed with contempt and brought to a shabby and mean fame. Under the influence of the past-look and the future-look in religion, which leaves the present unrespected and unhallowed, practical life is degraded and daily duties are abused. Now, this may happen in two ways.

First, life may become sordid, selfish, luxurious. The present is not grand; only the past. Therefore the present is not rousing; only the future. No awe of life, of present responsibil-

ity, of the greatness of opportunity, of the glory of labor, of the dignity of improvement, of the claim of all on each one—no such awe is like to arise in a time marked, if so I may speak, by a cessation of divinity,—God having been wonderfully present in the past and to be so with equal glory in the future, but here not visible nor working glories, but only ruling, if so I may say, at second hand, like a traveling landlord or a monarch afar off. No such thought of the present will tend to breed heroes, reformers, sisters of mercy, pure poets, soldiers of freedom, or the patient faithful who toil unwitnessed and unsung; no, but luxury and ease, self-indulgence, aimlessness, wanton uselessness, tyranny. For the present then is not sacred—only the miraculous past; nor calls and stirs up the soul—only the future heaven.

Or, again, the present may be left bare and unhallowed by another kind of evil, an anchorite contempt for the world and the body. This spirit in the name of religion despises the good work of God. I would not put this offence on the level of that other fruit of an unhallowed present, namely, the wanton plunging into pleasures; but it is very bad and has wrought much evil. Possibly there is as much defilement of the divine creation in contemning it and using it not at all, as in rioting in it and using it ill. Before we can help to make the world better by so much as one small step, we must love it as it is, and not believe it a devil's-wile.

Whether by the first way of despising the present, as a time worth no more than for wanton and selfish pleasureing or inglorious ease, or by the second way, a contempt of the world and the body as mere beggarly flesh, the religion whose life is of the past, whose desire is of the future, will cast an unhallowing beam on the life of the present. Yet not so aught it to be. Not so is God to be known. Not so will life be lifted up or religion be graced. Rather with all its voices, all its preachers and choirs, religion should sing with the poet,

"Paradise and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields, * * * *
* * * * why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these

A simple produce of the common day.
 —I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
 Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse
 Of this great consummation ; and, by words
 Which speak of nothing more than what we are,
 Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep
 Of death, and win the vacant and the vain
 To noble raptures !”

It will not be astray if the growth of religion be defined as the process of the elevation of the present to divinity. Here must I fix the very seat of religion, in the *dignity of the present moment*. I look back for the growth and beginning of religion —this is no more than history ; but *here*, in this very time for its authority.* I look forward for the greater moral triumphs and more devout beauty of religion—this is no more than righteous hope ; but *here*, in this very time, for its sanctions, its virtue, its excellence. Yea, I will say its virtue and excellence even if there were no future. For were it *nothing* to be one of Rabbi Jehosha’s angels ?

“ Rabbi Jehosha used to say
 That God made angels every day,
 Perfect as Michael and the rest
 First brooded in Creation’s nest,
 Whose only office was to cry
 Hosanna ! once and then to die ;
 Or rather with life’s essence blent,
 To be led home from banishment.

Rabbi Jehosha had the skill
 To know that Heaven is in God’s will ;
 And doing that, though for a space
 One heart-beat long, may win a grace,
 As full of grandeur and of glow
 As Princes of the Chariot know.”

How pure, how religious the faith which glows with the divine candescence of self-forgetfulness ! It is supreme content with God, and a quietude of love. Oh ! let my soul say,—“ This life is good, a great delight, an excellence, a blessing. I rejoice that

*While religion never looks to the past for *authority* when it has come to its fulness, yet always it looks behind or back in a sense, “underneath us,” to “the everlasting aims.” Thus it does by its nature; for religion is that sentiment, awe, love, which “binds us back” to our source. But this is a past always touching the present and involved in the present. For it is not a religious thought that we were made once and done with ; but that we are perpetually of one Source, from whom we *came*, in the mystery of time, but of whom we *come* continually, and “in him live and move and have our being. And this is the direct relationship of each spirit in itself, with no dependence on mediation in past or present. See Sermons I and II in this volume , pp 5 and 13 to 20.

I have lived. Are my past years nothing? And this very moment when I rejoice in the sweetness I have had, still sweeter to the last with the tenderness of reminiscence, is all this nothing, that I should repine if there were no more? I ask not what is in store for me, whether in love thou appoint more or in equal love now make an end. My spirit is overpowered with fifty years of loving-kindness in a universe passing and re-passing with incessant God. It is good that I am what I am; and whatever thou ordainest is good,—yea the best!"

This attitude of soul is as perfect in ethics as in religion. Its moral excellence lies in its undivided emphasis on virtue. Moral worth is lifted up therein by reason of its own divine right. Too long has virtue been a pack-horse at the truck of salvation. But the test of virtue is disinterestedness. Nothing is virtuous which is a managing for admission to palaces above. Morality of itself is commanding, imperative, sovereign, divine. It needs no sanctions. It dates from no epoch, nor points to any object. My vast faith, indeed, is that in dying we perish not, but live. Yet, whether we live after the death of the body or not, still it is better to be virtuous than vicious, kind than cruel, forgiving than revengeful; better to build up the body a holy sacrifice, than a profane altar of unhallowed rites; Better to expand the wings of the spirit than to flutter our day in impotence. Love, honor, truth, integrity, benevolence are good in themselves and now. Another life increases not their moral dignity anywhere nor their value here. Therefore, wait we with a loving quietness, having the one thing needful, which is the goodness of God witnessing within us, to give us knowledge of the good, that it *is* good.

Meantime,

"O wealth of thought beyond all bound!
Eternity each moment given!
What plummet may the Present sound?
Who promises a *future* heaven?"

At this moment creation culminates; not in the past, for it has been ever a-doing; not in the future, wherein not yet appears what we shall be; but now creation is at its height in God, and every instant it is finishing in him. Behold this plainly on the earth,—in the earth itself, which never was so lovely, never so free from roaring tempest and convulsions and fire and ice, in all its

æons of preparation, as now it is; in man, who never was so delicate in face and form, never so kingly in apprehension, never so sound in health, nor so wide in love and joy, as now he is; in animals and plants, all living creatures, which have been arising and refining and beautifying for vast æons, and never were so fair in form and nature, as now they are,—and by man's care, which is involved in God's care, they grow richer and fairer continually. Behold the same also in the infinite heavens, where “worlds without number lie in His bosom like children.” What creations and abodes, beginning, growing, mid-way made, finished, ending, must space hold! What vastness, what inconceivableness, what life and effluence—all now at height in God, and never ceasing. Creation is not an act, but action, “new every morning and fresh every evening.” When I awake, that instant creation is new and infinite, done for me.

It is certain that there never was so much knowledge of God as now, and never so many open ways to know of him as now, when the passing instant completes the record of his providence, and each soul can add its own experience to the gathered past.

The past is the development of knowledge, which by necessity always culminates *just now*; and the immanent order which reigns, forbids that any time should seem of more religious moment than any other, or more holy or authoritative to feeling or thought than that *last moment* which is *forever here* and finishes for the instant the Revelation of God.

The record of experience which we call the past is the foundation of knowledge. The sum of knowledge which the present is, is the home of religion. To religion the past is no more than the time when other men were religious; the future, the time when the children's children shall be religious. Religion lives, and is determined by *what is known of God*,—those thoughts about Him in which the forgoing living and learning of men *at this moment culminates*. Before this the spirit bows as revealing the Infinite, Eternal One who has upheld all the past, and now no more than in the past, and no less, and forever the same, rules “with the glory of a Father.”

Not by reason of the soul's knowledge of any ways of God in the past, nor by reason of any desires of favor from him in the future, but by reason of its *ideal of him*, who is the culmina-

tion not only of the past, but of its own life, does the spirit worship and pray. By reason of all its feeling of his immanent love, of his supreme providence in justice and moral worth, of the marvelous order which is the shadow of his perfection on nature, of perfect holiness and truth, of perfect power, of his inward revelation and the soul's own sufficiency to itself through the divine communication ; by reason, perhaps, most of all, of that ineffableness which our own being hath in him, which conceals him by his very nearness to us, and brings a measure of imperfection into all human dispositions or expression unto him, save a silence, a wonder of adoration—by reason of this the spirit worships and prays, with no thought of any past or future in the presence of the transcendent mystery from which time itself proceeds. Religion is our disposition of devotion toward the Supreme and Infinite One. But what he is, he is forever. Religion by its very terms, as relation between him and me, knows therefore nothing but the present moment, the impending now. We no more look back for Revelation than for Protection. He who, at this moment, shadows our feet with himself, at this moment also invokes us by the authority of the last issue of His Eternal Revelation.

Here then, we see what high and pure religiousness is—in two parts : First it is the thought and apprehension of God now : Secondly, and following therefrom, it is the glorifying of all life's deep things and all our duties now, of every small and obscure faithfulness, as in the presence of God, and as our post in his order. What can the greatest star do more than hold its place, and know it is its place in God, and beam therein? And whoso but feeds a love-lamp in the window of his eye, or gives forth a voice of kindly cheer, doth no less;

"And God will listen amid the throng
For his one breath of perfect song,
That, in its simple human way,
Says all the Hosts of Heaven can say"